

THE LITTLE NUN OF THE GARDEN

And How Her Serenity Was Disturbed

THE Youngest Nun looked out over the green, sunlit garden, and sighed. The Youngest Nun was not a nun at all, but only the Littlest Novice, and as she looked into the garden the faintest ghost of a smile curled her sweet, roguishly bowed lips that always found it difficult to be properly serious and nunlike. She gazed intently at the garden gate. Still dreaming, she found it hard to remember that this was not really an enchanted garden, so peaceful it was, so heavenly calm the brooding air. The novice stood on the second-floor veranda, the long upper porch, which the Dragon—that is, the Mother Superior—called the gallery, and she could have seen into the street over the top of the high convent wall where she so minded, but some inner voice seemed to warn of the dangers that lurked beyond and kept her eyes from straying. Her reverie was broken by a soft step near her. Turning, she beheld the gentle Mistress of Novices.

"Child," the nun chided in her caressing voice, "you should not waste time in idle dreams. Read, if you will, or tell your beads, for the devil is ever seeking idle hands to do his work."

The novice bowed her head slightly and made plaintive answer: "I can't keep the dreams away, Sister. It is hard to come down to earth when I seem to be so near to heaven here."

"Child, dear, we have work to do ere we can enter there." She shook her head thoughtfully. "I fear you have no vocation for the religious life. You are too brimful of romance—which in itself is good," she added to allay the hurt she saw dawning in deep eyes. "Ah, well, time will tell."

Later the novice sat on a bench, munching an apple after the manner of any nineteen-year-old, and straightway the dreams began to come again. She determined to say her beads, and a sudden inspiration came to her. She would pray for everyone who passed by. Poor souls! They did not know where to seek rest and contentment. The first to pass, a slovenly washwoman, was the unconscious recipient of two Hail Marys, before the novice gave ten, a whole decade, to a prosperous looking man of middle age. And then—there came leisurely down the street—a man. She had a queer little sensation in her breast, and so began to pray with more devotion. He surely needs it, she said to herself. Then her heart stopped beating entirely. The man raised his eyes to the top of the wall, gave one leap and bestrode it.

"Why, he's coming over!" she gasped in astonishment. "He doesn't know that this is a convent. I must warn him." She leaned far out over the banisters and called in a clear, high voice: "Really, you mustn't do that! It isn't allowed."

The man started, looked up at the apparition and grinned at her boyishly.

"Oh, but I must—it's a bet," he threw at her gaily.

The girl clasped her hands in an agony of fear. A man in the convent garden, and coming in that way! Why didn't he ring the bell and ask Reverend Mother—but that would never do! She caught her full black skirts about her and ran down the steps—her one thought to keep the invader from the sanctity of the garden. She sped lightly over the long, lush grass, left a bit of her veil on the Lady Baltimore rosebush that reached out to detain her, and, flushed and panting, halted beneath the wall, turning a lovely, protesting face upward. The flush deepened as two dark blue eyes, with laughter in the depth of them, met hers.

"Please," she faltered, struggling with confusion, "please go away! This is a convent. The sisters would die of fright should a man be found here."

"Oh, I won't be found here; I'll only be a moment," he explained good-humoredly. "You see, I know it's a convent garden, that is why I'm here. And now"—his blue eyes revered the white innocence of her face, but disregarded entirely the black veil which framed it—"now, I'm glad I came."

A little flash of merriment in dark eyes answered him. "You won't be if you meet the Dragon," she warned; and, as a bell sounded faintly clear from the house, a quick change swept over her face. "I am late. They are calling me," she gasped in explanation, and sped away.

"Good-bye, Little Nun of the Garden." He called softly under his breath, but she heard him and looked back.

The next afternoon at 4 o'clock the novice sat on the long upper veranda and did not dream nor tell her beads. She just sat and thought, and the more the stranger with the blue eyes worried her. What must he think of a nun who ran through a garden to hold converse with a stranger perched on a forbidden wall? She did not mind the lecture the gentle Mistress of Novices had given her for leaving the gallery; she did not even worry about the keen glance she had gotten from the Reverend Mother—but she wished that she could see the blue-eyed stranger again—just to find out what he thought of her. With a suddenness that startled her her wish was answered. She glanced down just in time to see a gray-clothed form vault lightly into the garden. He looked up, scanning the gallery and caught sight of her, whereupon he smiled and waved gaily.

She knew that she should be furious—any nun would be. Then she remembered, for the first time, with a sense of relief, that she wasn't a nun at all, but only the youngest novice. She turned to go into the house, when he called her softly: "Little Nun, Little Nun of the Garden!" and perforce she went down to silence him. As she went she formulated certain

sentences that would effectually bar him from the garden forever.

"Oh, Little Nun," he called before she had reached him, "who or what is the Dragon?"

She laid a slim finger on her lips. "Don't," she began, coming close, her wide eyes entreating him, "don't speak so loud. I don't know why I said that."

"But who is it?" insisted the man, with a smile for her nearness and fairness.

"The Reverend Mother." She brought out the words with a gasp at her own audaciousness. He broke into a merry, boyish laugh. With a rush she was beside him, her hand over his mouth. "You will have me disgraced! I might be expelled from the convent."

He drew away. "I hope they do expel you," he said seriously. "You do not belong here. I could tell you where you were intended to be."

She looked at him haughtily. "You have forgotten yourself. I am not interested in you or your suppositions. Kindly leave the garden, and do not return." She stood tensely as he turned to go, but as he paused on the top of the wall she clasped her slender hands upon her throat. She gave no other sign that she heard him as he leaned down and whispered:

"I am taking you with me in my heart, Little Nun. That is where you belong and will always be." And he was gone.

She had blushed, but now was paler than the white cowl she wore. She stood motionless, staring at the wall, then turning, she walked slowly back to the convent. . . .

It was the eve of her Profession, a year later. The Novice entered the Community Room after the nuns had gathered. She did not heed the inquiring glance of the little Mistress, but went to Reverend Mother, where she sat at the head of the long table.

"Mother," she said without flinching, yet her voice sounded vague and strange to her, "I cannot be professed tomorrow." She heard the little rustle as each nun paused in her work and looked up with astonished eyes. "Sister Angela was right. I have no vocation." She stood with bent head as one awaits a death sentence. . . .

The great doors opened silently on a sunlit street, intensifying the shadows in the great hall and the two dark-robed figures that stood there with white faces, moist eyes and smiling lips. An instant after the doors were wide a sob broke the stillness and a slight form in a light dress that had been fashionable a year before flung itself into the arms of sweet Sister Angela. Two slim hands clasped her convulsively.

"There, child, there," the nun said, smoothing the short curls that framed the face. The other figure turned away and wiped the glasses Reverend Mother was always mislaying.

"You have been so good to me, all of you. I hate to leave! I hate to leave! Oh, Dragon," she sobed, turning to the other nun, "is it too late? Do you think I ought to go?"

Reverend Mother took the girl into her arms. "It would be selfishness for us to keep you, child," she replied a trifle unsteadily. "It's hard for us to lose our Little Novice, but God sees fit to use you out there." She indicated the sunlit street, but to the Youngest Nun her gestures meant "the World."

She shivered. Her hot little hand clung to the cool, capable one. "I am afraid," she whispered, a dawning terror of the unknown glimmering in wide eyes. "I am afraid! You will pray for me, Reverend Mother?"

"Ah," the nun assured her gravely.

The wet face smiled. "I have fought the Flesh and the Devil lo, these many years," she flung at them, "and now I go to meet—the World!"

She resolutely crossed into the sunlight.

"God be with you. God bless you," came soft voices from the shadows, as the doors swung silently together, leaving Molly Gray alone on a sunshiny street.

It seemed to Molly pacing the long hall of the hospital, where she had been in training for the past six months, that it was not such a far cry to the dim coolness of other corridors and other times. Yet how many ages ago since those peaceful, uneventful days, with their blessed routine of work and prayer and innocent recreation! And the garden. . . . She blushed now with her rapidly accruing worldly wisdom, and in the mist that rose before her she saw two laughing blue eyes looking searchingly into her own. The rustle of stiffly starched skirts at her side, and the superintendent stood there.

"You are to take charge of an accident in Number 30, Miss Gray," came the decisive tones. "Just see that the patient is kept quiet. Dr. King has operated, but the case is probably fatal."

Molly turned, her heart going out in quick sympathy to the poor unfortunate. She entered the darkened room quietly. The patient lay with face to the wall. Molly, awed by the presence of approaching death, stood for a second beside the bed, looking sadly at the motionless form. A groan broke the stillness.

She crossed to a table near the window and her deft fingers moving among the bottles found the little case she sought. She bent over the bed.

"This will ease the suffering," she said gently.

At the sound of her voice the patient turned, and Molly found herself looking into the blue eyes, from which all the laughter had flown. The needle dropped from nerveless fingers.